Dealing with the commemorative legacy of the past

Introduction

Previous chapters have illustrated that changes to the public landscape of memory began manifesting themselves almost immediately after the end of apartheid, while simultaneously the administrative restructuring of the heritage management sector was under way and the formulation of policies about heritage and public monuments slowly proceeded at national and local levels. In comparison with many international contexts, for instance post-soviet societies, South Africa did not experience incidents of mob violence against monuments representing the old regime, but a few markers were indeed destroyed, deliberately or inadvertently; some statues and especially busts were removed; some monuments were relocated; and others were re-interpreted or re-contextualized. Sometimes the need for a clear policy on such matters of symbolic representation was prioritised only after a de facto alteration of the heritage landscape had caused dissent.

Discussing key examples as case studies, this chapter examines new challenges affecting symbolic markers representing the old guard and how the latter have been adapted to the needs of a new socio-political order. I will trace the fate of specific contested monuments and engage with the processes and discourses that shaped the remoulding of their meaning and sometimes their physical appearance. It will become evident, once again, that the treatment of existing memory sites involves a delicate balancing act between signalling continuity in the interest of reconciliation and rupture in the interest of defining a new beginning. The chapter is structured along the lines of the different options that present themselves for dealing with contested heritage, which can broadly be categorised as removal, relocation and re-interpretation. I argue that the effectiveness of re-interpretation in rendering a contested monument acceptable to the majority is often doubtful, and furthermore that the modification of the originally intended meaning in the name of political correctness is often unacceptable to the minority who identify with these
markers. The obvious solution, then, is to build new monuments complementing existing heritage.

Destruction, damage and vandalism

In broad daylight during the afternoon of Thursday, 18th September 2003, thieves removed a large bronze sculptural group from Beyers Naudé square in front of the Municipal Library in the city centre of Johannesburg. The sculpture was called ‘Family group’, created by Ernst Ullmann, and given to the City by The Star on 6 May 1968. Amazingly the theft of this massive sculptural piece took less than two minutes and was precisely timed between 3:10 pm and 3:12 pm to elude the rotating security camera. Nobody saw the incident (Basson 2003). The whereabouts of the bronze group remains unknown. Most likely it was sold to a private art collector, but it may also have landed at a scrap metal dealer’s to be melted down.

Countless monuments have suffered from the removal of bronze plaques or the sawing off of protruding sections of the sculpture.¹ As said

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¹ One example is Anton van Wouw’s well-known Kruger monument in Church Square in Pretoria. The Daily News reported on 23 January 1996 that vandals had sawn off the barrel of a Martini Henry rifle held by one of the Burgher